# Inside Octopus - Internships

**Russ:** [00:00:04] Thanks for listening to Inside Octopus. My name is Russell Goldsmith, and in this episode, we are going to be focusing on internships at Octopus Energy with a particular focus on our Octopus energy equality internship, which offers placements across a number of different departments for candidates from black, African or Caribbean backgrounds. Joining me online, firstly, we have two of the people responsible for managing the Octopus energy equality internships. Joanna Lau, who is one of our data scientists, and Vania Milkova a delivery coordinator in the flexibility team. And then I'm thrilled to also have with us two current interns from that program Adewumi Oni-Shogbonyo who is in the data team, and Tsekani Barzey, who has been working as a back-end developer in the Kraken tech team. So, thank you, all of you for coming on the podcast. Joanna let's come to you first. I thought we could start by understanding a little more about the internships available at Octopus Energy and also the background to why this particular one, the Energy Equality Internship Program specifically was set up.

**Joanna:** [00:01:08] Well, as a growing company, there's so many ways to join Octopus as an intern. So, these can range from conducting a research master's project and joining a specific team. Or it could be coming to us, as it will in one of our more specialized internship programs. And I think a really unique thing about Octopus is that you have the ability to propose and drive initiatives that you really feel passionate about. And as a company, we're interested in making green energy affordable and accessible to everyone. So, we're also full of people who want to build a team that really represents that. And we found that in the energy sector as well as in areas such as tech and data, that these are really underrepresented by people of colour. So, in previous years, the tech team created the Ada Lovelace internship, which focused on developing diversity in the tech industry. However, following on from the events in 2020, such as the Black Lives Matter movement, this Equality Internship was born from a really committed group of volunteers in the company and it was a multi departmental effort to welcome these groups, specifically those identified with any black, African or Caribbean background, and introduce them into this really rapidly growing and increasingly important energy world. And from the success of last year, this organizational team has grown. For example, I'm one of these newbies and we've come back this year and expanded the internship to include other departments such as investments and data, which is the team that I work in.

**Russ:** [00:02:29] In terms of the energy sector, what's the representation in terms of like the percentage of people from that background?

**Joanna:** [00:02:35] I think studies have shown that it's less than 5% of the energy sector that's made up of black professionals. So that's why we really wanted to change that.

**Russ:** [00:02:44] Vania. Can you go into a little bit more detail on what's involved in setting up this equality internship?

**Vania:** [00:02:49] Initially the internship was set up by a cross-functional team across Octopus. So initially it was between the few operations members and some tech team. And as Joanna said, it did expand to data and Octopus Renewables this year. We were kind of doing it as we went along. We hadn't set anything up like this before and Octopus and did learn a lot of lessons along the way. But we really wanted to focus on giving a well-rounded experience in this internship. So not just really basic jobs that you might find in most common internships, but really give an insight to the company as a whole. So, through setting up TEDTalks throughout the internship with senior management and also giving the interns a project that they could really work towards and be proud of at the end to show what they've done with their time here. In terms of the recruitment process, we really wanted to focus on getting motivated individuals in the areas rather than the more experienced candidates. So, we didn't ask for a CV, just wanted to know why they were interested, what they wanted to gain from this, and just have an honest conversation about that and decide based on that. I think the most popular role this year was definitely the Data scientist role had eighty applications and we managed to take two. Initially it was going to be one, but I think we extended it to two because we had so many great applicants. Yeah, so that's just a brief overview on what was involved in setting up the internship.

**Russ:** [00:04:19] And how long is the program?

**Vania:** [00:04:20] Nine weeks this year. It was eight weeks last year.

**Russ:** [00:04:23] And Joanna, of course, this is not part of your actual role at Octopus, so. Yeah. How do both of you find time for all this?

**Joanna:** [00:04:30] It's been a learning curve and it's definitely difficult. I think while it's really great that Octopus allows us the freedom to drive projects that we're really interested in and believe are important to do, and it's really great to have their support in this.

**Russ:** [00:04:43] Yeah, definitely. I think it's great that we've got you guys onto the show to highlight the program, and it's probably about time that we actually heard from our two interns who have joined us. So, Adewumi and Tsekani, tell us a little bit about yourselves, first of all, and how you found out and applied for these for the internship. So, Adewumi let's start with you.

**Adewumi:** [00:04:59] I was studying computer science in Nottingham and I just finished the year off and I was just looking to just practice a bit of Python and just work through it. So, my sister sent me this application or the company and I thought, Oh, I could use the technical question. That's a bit more practice. That was my whole idea. So, I wasn't actually planning on thinking I would get it. I just wanted to see what would happen and. I guess this is what happened. Yeah.

**Russ:** [00:05:22] You're working in the data team, is that right?

**Adewumi:** [00:05:24] Oh, yes, I am.

**Russ:** [00:05:25] Okay. And so whereabouts are you based?

**Adewumi:** [00:05:27] I've been working in the London office with Joanna.

**Russ:** [00:05:29] Tsekani, how about yourself?

**Tsekani:** [00:05:30] I'm studying computer science at Kingston University and redoing my final year project this year to. There’s a caveat to that, I wanted to get like some work in the industry alongside or at least find out about the industry while I'm doing my final project. So, I was going to try and look for internships and my mum found this internship for me. She's a teacher and it was going around in their circles, so she sent it to me, and I thought I'd try to see if I got lucky. And so, we got given a test where we had to parse a meter reading and I didn't actually do the test that. Well, I only found out about this later because I straight up asked. And then the reason I got in was through the interview process where they noted that I had planned to improve, and I'd admitted to mistakes I'd made. I'm currently working in the Kraken team or back in development team in the London office as well.

**Russ:** [00:06:24] That's great, Joanna. Just seeing you nodding along there to what Tsekani was saying about that interview process. Is that something that you were specifically looking for in terms of, acknowledging that maybe the test didn't go so well, but there's potential there?

**Joanna:** [00:06:36] Yeah. I mean, it's definitely following on from what Vania was saying, which is we weren't looking for like the finished article. It's not one of those internships, it's one where it's about the talent available and seeing the potential. So, we set like some technical challenge just to just to see that there's some basic understanding or some interest as well in doing this kind of role. But we were happy to talk things through at the end afterwards and interview and find out like the thought process behind it. And if the candidates were willing to admit they don't know everything or if they were happy to take on feedback as well, because it's also important that we can work together well.

**Russ:** [00:07:11] Are you guys working on specific projects at all, Adewumi is there a particular project that you're working on at the moment?

**Adewumi:** [00:07:17] So I'm right now I'm working on a migration into airflow, which will just allow tasks to be automated and be emailed out automatically.

**Russ:** [00:07:26] And before you applied, what did an internship mean to you? And were you expecting to actually be working on such deep specific projects like that?

**Adewumi:** [00:07:34] No, not at all. I thought it would be more of like a shadowing role, to be honest, or maybe do a task, but it would be like a quarter of the task and then pass over the rest of the work to someone more senior. I didn't realise some tasks would be beginning to end. I'd be able to take my own approach to it, which is very surprising.

**Russ:** [00:07:51] Tsekani has it met with your expectation as all?

**Tsekani:** [00:07:53] Not really, because I expected like a corporate climate. I wasn't really expecting the culture that I got in Octopus. You go in in casual clothes when you're expecting an ironed shirt with your polished shoes and it's not like that. And everyone's still managed to stay focused on their work, but all really relaxed. And if I do, you know, go into a corporate climate, it's going to be a struggle to adapt. And with the workload as well, I wasn't expecting it. They actually got me doing stuff that is I wouldn't consider crucial but beneficial. So right now, I'm adding to like a dashboard. So, you can actually have data that is very useful for people to view when they're actually doing their work. Which was unexpected, to say the least.

**Russ:** [00:08:40] Vania mentioned some of the things that you've experienced on the internship. One of those was these talks from senior people, TED talk style presentations. What's that been like?

**Tsekani:** [00:08:47] They've actually been really interesting. Like I found them quite engaging. For example, we did a talk on energy procurement, which was essentially how Octopus got the energy from the producers as a supplier through the grid and got it into consumers’ homes and we really went into detail on how that process worked. We focused on only to be focused on the actual purchasing of the energy itself and why that ties into the energy crisis that we have nowadays with the energy sector and consumers’ bills rising. And that was an interesting talk. We also spoke to Greg [Jackson], the CEO, as well as James Eddison, who's the chief technical officer, and head of Kraken Technology, who is the head of department I’m working in. And they spoke about the piece of software which allows Octopus to deal with us and be such a customer focused business.

**Russ:** [00:09:45] That's great. Adewumi, were you expecting to get to hear from the CEO as Tsekani just said? Any highlights for you from those talks?

**Adewumi:** [00:09:53] For me, definitely the talk about energy procurement was the one I enjoyed the most. I'd say the fact that we were able to speak to people who have been in the company for so many years. It was really eye opening and hearing their experiences from when it was a much smaller company. It was interesting. It was nice to just hear and get to a point where things like this can happen from such a small company or started out as such a small company.

**Russ:** [00:10:16] Adewumi has the fact that you joined the program with a number of people at the same time, has that helped? Did you all bond? Was there a particular kind of energy or feeling when you all get together at all?

**Adewumi:** [00:10:26] Yeah, I'd say definitely in terms of just the feeling that we all starting in together at the same time, we all don't know everything at the same time. And I'd say just people that look like you and also just relate to you as well. I think that's a very important factor that is overlooked sometimes.

**Russ:** [00:10:42] Do you think do you think you'll stay in touch now after the program?

**Adewumi:** [00:10:43] Hopefully. We've got to see though.

**Russ:** [00:10:47] And what about in terms of have you learned anything about yourself from this internship?

**Adewumi:** [00:10:52] I'd say maybe I'm not as confident as I thought I was in these places. And maybe it takes a bit more time for me to get used to a place I’m not as comfortable with. But I guess I'm growing into it and seeing how it works.

**Russ:** [00:11:03 Yeah, that's good. Tsekani how about yourself?

**Tsekani:** [00:11:05] I've learned that I can be kind of stubborn when it comes to trying to get the work done. I don't like to ask for help, and that's really something I need to get into because in Octopus, if you have a problem, you are kind of expected to go around and ask for help to get it done like everyone respects and they will understand if you don't know something and want to learn to improve. And part of that process is asking for help. And if you don't do it, you can't really start.

**Russ:** [00:11:28] And what about moving forward? Do you think this has opened your eyes up to the energy sector? Is it a sector that you want to work in or maybe go back and apply for a full-time role at Octopus? Maybe?

**Tsekani:** [00:11:37] Yeah. I would consider working in the energy sector again, maybe not specifically within the national grid as we know it right now. Maybe later on or maybe trying to get it to the point where it's actually a truly sustainable grid. I'd like to work on that because right now I'm focusing what I'm doing is working with customers, well not customers, but the actual industry itself. So, what we have currently and not looking to the future of the work I'm doing right now.

**Russ:** [00:12:06] And you touched on it just earlier. But in terms of like that workplace, the culture at Octopus, is that what you're going to be now looking for?

**Tsekani:** [00:12:13] Most definitely. I genuinely do not want to have to wake up for my 9 to 5 with a freshly tailored suit, spending horrendous amounts and travel to go to Canary Wharf and sit in an office all day. It's not what I'm looking for.

**Russ:** [00:12:25] Not for you

**Tsekani:** [00:12:26] No

**Russ:** [00:12:27] Adewumi, How about yourself in terms of, like, your views where you're going to look to apply after your studies finish? Is it going to be energy sector? Is it going to be Octopus?

**Adewumi:** [00:12:39] We have to wait and see I’ve got a while left but we'll have to wait and see.

**Russ:** [00:12:43] Excellent. What about the fact that obviously this internship that you've joined was specifically for those from BAME backgrounds? How do you feel about that, Tsekani?

**Tsekani:** [00:12:52] I feel like more people would have applied if it was a typical internship because I'm not really personally affected by not having people of the same colour in a workspace. And I understand that that's something that people most definitely would look for, and it's something that people should be striving for. But some companies only do this to tick a diversity box, and it's not really something I would aim for, honestly.

**Russ:** [00:13:19] That's interesting viewpoint Vania thoughts on this area?

**Vania:** [00:13:23] Yeah, so we were actually quite intentional with making the internship specifically for those of black African and Caribbean backgrounds rather than just a BAME internship, because there are a lot of internships out there that are for the BAME community. But we understand that not every minority within the BAME community has the same struggles or lack of opportunity, etc. And we really wanted to focus on providing opportunities for those with black, Caribbean or African backgrounds. And I'm actually really proud to be a part of something that created an opportunity like this. It is quite unheard of. But yeah, I mean, I'm really happy that we've been able to do it.

**Russ:** [00:14:07] Adewumi what would your advice be then to other companies looking to launch a similar program to this?

**Adewumi:** [00:14:12] I'd say that we often hear that diversity is a part of successful companies, but I'd say it's not always in all levels. Even areas like the internship level, I think is very important that that has diversity too. So that's what I'd say for other companies.

**Russ:** [00:14:26] Tsekani, your thoughts on that.

**Tsekani:** [00:14:29] If another company was trying to launch a similar internship specifically for black African and Caribbean heritage people, I feel like I'm different, in my opinion, to Vania. When she said earlier that she was going to say that different minority groups have different needs, that is a fact. Instead of like equality, I think we should focus on egality where everyone should get the support necessary to reach it so that they are equal. If one group doesn't need support and one group needs less support, one needs more support, we should provide that. So, while this internship is this one, particularly, the octopus one was for black African and minority ethnic group Black African and Caribbean groups, if they're going to run a similar program in another company, they should at least provide provision for other minority ethnic groups, maybe in a smaller amount if they do want to provide it.

**Russ:** [00:15:19] Joanna, your thoughts on this.

**Joanna:** [00:15:21] Yeh, so in terms of advice for other companies looking to do this, Tsekani makes a great point, which is providing this for a range of ethnic groups, I think that would be something we would love to do. But in terms of actually getting a programme like this up and running I’d say, firstly having a really authentic, genuine interest in this work is really important. You need to approach this from the point of really caring about what you want the interns to get from this internship and be committed to this not being a one-off box tick exercise, but something more lasting. So, I think you have to be willing to not get it right straight away, you’re building for the future and the long-term, and be looking to improve with each iteration. I really hope that in this internship it’s clear we feel very strongly about this and we’re trying our best and we’re really just looking to improve later on. Another really important thing is to be willing to invest. You have to make a real commitment to improve diversity and equality, and I think one of the best ways you can do this is to put your money where your mouth is. You have to really fund these initiatives properly, for example, like we have with a paid internship, and you really acknowledge and recognise the invisible work from the team that goes into it by reflecting it in their career progression. ~~We don’t want to kind of improve some areas of diversity by shifting the problem, which is like invisible work, to another area. I think~~ to make this sustainable, we have to account for that or be aware of it. I guess a final thing is to promote this work that you are doing. Encourage other companies to do the same, this happens both intra- and inter-company. You need to have these discussions because we’re coming to the end of our internship now and it’s clear that more people are interested in becoming involved which is great. And using your platforms, platforms such as this, are really important.

**Russ:** [00:17:04] So Vania I assume you're looking to run this program again.

**Vania:** [00:17:07] So at the moment, there's nothing set in stone. But, you know, we have run it like for the past two years very successfully and it has been evolving and growing. It really depends on the capacity of the teams that we're working with and those that are planning the internship, too.

**Russ:** [00:17:19] OK. Adewumi and Tsekani, assuming there will be other programs like this, whether it's an Octopus or other companies running. What tips would you give for anyone looking to apply? Adewunmi. Let's come to you first on that.

**Adewumi:** [00:17:35] I'd say try to apply to as many as you can, but also look into the company and see if it aligns with the way you think. I mean, that's one of the most important things like especially here. I think the fact that it aligned with some of the things I thought and the way they've organized this whole internship has been perfect for the way I think. And it's just aligned with my way of thinking.

**Russ:** [00:17:56] Tsekani. How about yourself?

**Tsekani:** [00:17:57] Don't be afraid to ask questions or in the interview process. Because an internship is a place where you go to learn and gain skills. If you don't show or at least provide some interest in having that learning process, then you're not really going to get anything out of it and you're just taking up space with someone else who would want that opportunity.

**Russ:** [00:18:17] That's a great answer. Let's just finish up then. Vania assuming that Octopus are going to run something like this again or other internships, obviously. Where's the best place for anyone listening to get more information on this?

**Vania:** [00:18:28] So definitely keep an eye on the Octopus Careers page. The internships when live, should be listed there. And there's also a page for the specific internship where we've blogged about the last year. And if there is future opportunities, it should be listed there, too.

**Russ:** [00:18:45] Well, listen, I really appreciate you all coming on the podcast today. So Tsekani and Adewunmi, thank you so much for sharing your experiences with us. And obviously, best of luck with the rest of your studies and maybe we'll see you on this podcast in the future. Who knows? Johanna and Vania, of course, thanks for your time and good luck with the rest of the program. That's actually it for this episode. As always, if you've got any comments on anything we've discussed today, please do get in touch via the website at Octopus.Energy or via the usual social channels. But for now, from me, Russell Goldsmith. Thanks for listening and goodbye.